

6-1-2011

Promising Practices: Maine's Disability Program Navigator Grant, 2011

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Recommended Citation

Maine Department of Labor and Bureau of Employment Services, "Promising Practices: Maine's Disability Program Navigator Grant, 2011" (2011). *Employment Services Documents*. Paper 15.
http://statedocs.maine.gov/bes_docs/15

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Promising Practices

Maine's Disability Program Navigator Grant

June 2011



Achieving a more welcoming, integrated and accessible CareerCenter system

In 2008, in Maine, 40 percent of adults with disabilities were employed — compared to 81 percent of adults without a disability. There are many people with disabilities who want to work, but are unemployed, under-employed, or have been unable to enter the job market. Through the DPN grant, the Maine Department of Labor hired a full-time DPN for each of the four Local Workforce Investment Areas as well as a Lead Disability Navigator to coordinate the effort. Maine's DPNs worked with the CareerCenters to get people the services they needed to find employment.



Promising Practices

Maine's Disability Program Navigator Grant

Achieving a more welcoming, integrated and accessible CareerCenter system

One-Stop Career Centers were designed to provide a full array of employment and training services under one roof and to enable job seekers and employers easy access to programs and resources. Established under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, One-Stop Career Centers operate in all 50 states and offer training referrals, career counseling, job listings, and similar employment-related services.

Universal access, a core principle of the One-Stop Career Center system, provides equal accessibility to all job seekers, including those with disabilities. For the most part, this was occurring in Maine CareerCenters, but there were areas identified as needing improvement. As in other states, the default referral for customers with disabilities was to Vocational Rehabilitation, when additional programs and services were also available.

The goal of the Disability Program Navigator (DPN) Initiative was to promote comprehensive services and work incentive information for Social Security Administration beneficiaries and other people with disabilities, about the programs available at Maine CareerCenters. Through communication and collaboration with partner agencies, DPNs have:

- streamlined the job-seeking process
- developed new and ongoing partnerships to achieve seamless, comprehensive and integrated access to services
- worked to expand Maine's workforce development system's capacity to serve customers with disabilities

This *Promising Practices* document provides insight into these strategies, as well as methods for fostering more successful partnerships to support individuals with disabilities in achieving employment.

The CareerCenter as an Employment Network of the Ticket to Work Program

Social Security's Ticket to Work program allows recipients who qualify for "Tickets" to achieve paid employment while keeping some of their benefits. Ticket holders choose an approved service provider, called an Employment Network (EN), which provides job search and other types of support services to individuals who receive SSI or SSDI. Prior to the DPN project, the CareerCenters were not approved as ENs; and, in northern Maine, there were no ENs available at the time. However, Vocational Rehabilitation was providing services to people with disabilities, but they often had a very long wait time before being served.

To encourage more Social Security recipients to take advantage of the Ticket program and the services of the CareerCenters, in 2009 the Maine Bureau of Employment Services (BES) received EN status. BES began a pilot program, accepting tickets at the Bangor, Presque Isle and Machias CareerCenters at that time. The DPNs serving these locations were assigned as the staff people to support Ticket holders. In addition, CareerCenter Ticket to Work Liaisons were identified at each site.



Having a person dedicated to the Ticket holder — especially a service provider who is integrated into CareerCenter services and understands the offerings of the larger service-provider community — is very valuable to customers. DPNs met with clients, wrote individual work plans, connected Ticket holders with existing CareerCenter services such as interviewing-skill workshops, and made referrals to other educational opportunities. Ticket holders had someone to help them create a plan, check back in with them periodically, and troubleshoot problems as they arose.

Example 1

Gerry, a 35 year old man with bipolar disorder, was receiving Social Security benefits. He had a family and a previous career in law enforcement. He wanted to get back to work and was referred to the local DPN. The DPN talked with Gerry about the Ticket to Work program, in which Gerry later enrolled. The DPN worked with Gerry to find employment. He showed him Maine's Job Bank and talked about how he could use it to find work. The DPN also encouraged Gerry to participate in Disability Mentoring Day. At the event, which was run through the CareerCenter, Gerry went to a presentation by Walmart and also learned about opportunities at a nearby call center. In the end, he had job offers at both places. Because the call center was close to his home, he chose that position. Gerry excelled during the training and is a natural with customers.

"When I connected with people, they didn't believe they could work and keep their benefits," said the DPN who worked with Gerry. "I tried to get case managers to see that Ticket to Work could be a good thing for their clients. The questions clients had were 'How does this affect my benefits?' and 'How do I navigate the CareerCenter?' Gerry wouldn't have heard about Ticket to Work if the CareerCenter hadn't been an Employment Network."

Integrated Resource Teams

The DPN Initiative made effective use of Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs) — a team comprised of public and private sector representatives along with the job seeker. By pulling these teams together, DPNs were able to efficiently resolve issues and remove barriers at the local level through improved communication.

Participants in the IRTs always include the job seeker and, depending on the situation, they also incorporate staff from the following: vocational rehabilitation, WIA service providers, community rehabilitation, employers, schools, the Maine Transition Network, family members, and Community Work Incentive Coordinators.

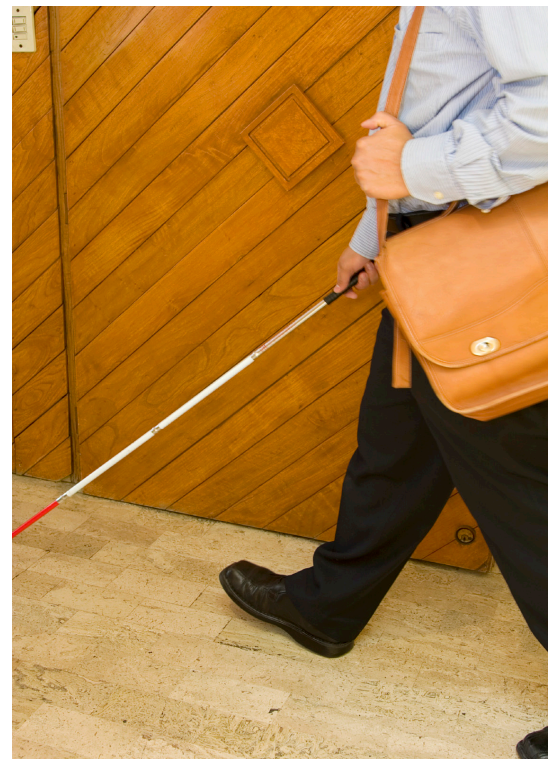
Example 2

‘John,’ a person with a significant physical disability, was referred to a DPN after contacting the Governor’s office for help due to frustration with the employment support system. John had been laid off from work in the IT field and had a high level of technical skill. He was seeking professional employment, but had lost contact with his vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor due to staffing changes.

The DPN met with John to better understand the services that he was receiving and subsequently arranged a meeting with John and his new VR counselor, the counselor’s supervisor, and the job developer who was working with John at the time. “I wanted to afford the client an opportunity to voice his goals and needed supportive services, as well as any concerns that he had, to us all,” recalled the DPN. “Everyone, including John, agreed on what they were responsible for and updated his employment plan. The team met three times to clarify John’s goals with him.” With all parties meeting together, John was also able to advocate for his own employment needs. As a team, they identified new job leads and, as a result, John went on to accept a lucrative job offer in his field.

Example 3

‘Bill’ contacted the DPN for assistance with his job search. The DPN met with him at a CareerCenter to review his resume and discuss his job search strategies. Through talking with Bill, the DPN learned that he was a client of VR and had a new case manager, who Bill was unaware of. He was also receiving services through the WIA provider agency at his local CareerCenter. Since the VR and WIA contacts didn’t know that the other was involved in Bill’s case, the DPN helped connect the two agencies. Once both providers became aware of the co-enrollment, each provider could share the costs of the vocational training that Bill was participating in, which was more efficient and cost effective, especially in light of funding cuts to both providers.



Technology, Outreach, and Improved Communication and Understanding

When the DPN project started, assistive technology equipment at Maine CareerCenters provided by the AbleME Grant was not widely used. CareerCenter staff had not been trained to use it and/or customers were not aware of its availability. This made using resources such as computers difficult for some customers.

One of the first things that the DPNs did was to conduct training for Maine CareerCenter staff on the assistive technology equipment and auxiliary aids that had mostly gone unused. A staff member at each Maine CareerCenter was placed in charge of the assistive technology to ensure that the equipment would continue to be used and maintained.

To make job seekers aware of the accessibility of Maine CareerCenters, DPNs created a video called, “Welcome to the CareerCenter” which was narrated in ASL, made posters advertising the assistive technology at the CareerCenters, added information about assistive technology on the CareerCenter website, and presented to provider agencies and other community groups on the availability of CareerCenter services and programs.

DPNs were able to provide more thorough trainings to Maine CareerCenter staff by initiating conversations to find out their interests and questions on disability and employment related topics. In response, the DPNs organized training on technology, disability etiquette, and work incentives. “We wanted to make sure that Maine CareerCenter employees understood that just because someone was on SSI, it didn’t mean they couldn’t work,” recalled one DPN. Training was also offered on accommodations, disclosure, and serving people with mental health disabilities. “There was more of an understanding that there are different levels of needs and less nervousness about helping people with disabilities,” said a DPN in reference to the mental health training. “We are a much better operation as a result of our participation in this program,” said a CareerCenter manager about the program.

To encourage continued awareness, DPNs created, posted and e-mailed disability-related “Tips of the Week” to Maine CareerCenter staff, partner agencies, employers and interested individuals to keep them up-to-date on the issues.

DPNs also ensured that Maine CareerCenters were more accessible to people by getting directly involved in cases.

Example 4

As ‘Sara,’ who had a traumatic brain injury, was speaking with a DPN about the Ticket to Work program, the DPN determined that Sara would need job coaching to be employed. The DPN suggested that Sara go to VR. Sara did this; however, there was a difficulty in getting Sara’s medical records. After some work, the DPN discovered that the right people hadn’t received the request for copies of the records. Because of the client’s injury, navigating this process was extremely difficult without assistance. “Without help she may have fallen through the cracks of the system,” said the DPN.

Expanding the Scope

Disability Mentoring Day (DMD) is a national event that has been growing in popularity in Maine. Job-shadow opportunities, workshops and celebrations are held throughout the state to encourage young people with disabilities to explore different career paths. Since 2007, DPNs have been actively involved in expanding the scope of Disability Mentoring Day. In 2009, there were more than 200 participants and 50 employers who participated.



As Maine CareerCenters are staffed by many different service providers, having a regional DPN available to help coordinate Disability Mentoring Day activities these last four years was very helpful with expanding the event. "Through working collaboratively and establishing good relationships with many agencies and employers, we were able to get more involvement," said one DPN. "I asked groups to do presentations. I cold-called employers and explained the event to them in the hope that they could participate with job shadow opportunities or be on an HR panel presentation." This collaborative approach was designed with sustainability in mind: by increasing the buy-in from other groups, the energy and involvement in DMD has grown exponentially.

DPNs helped recruit speakers such as Jill Cookson, a young woman with Down Syndrome. She participated as member of a panel made up of people with disabilities who have successfully entered employment. She talked about her job at Shaw's Supermarket, where she bags groceries and helps customers. She shared some of the challenges she had when adjusting to the job, but acknowledged that she has been able to solve most problems that come up with the help of weekly visits from her job coach. Jill can now add to her accomplishments her role as mentor to other job seekers who can be encouraged by her success.



Success through Partnership

The success of the DPN program was due, in large part, to the strength of the Initiative's partnerships and collaborative work. These partners included:

- Maine Department of Labor Vocational Rehabilitation
- Maine Department of Health and Human Services
- Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWICs)
- The state's Medicaid Infrastructure Grantee (CHOICES CEO)
- Many local service providers (for a more complete list, see Appendix A).

By building relationships with partner organizations, DPNs were able to connect people across organizations, encourage relationship-building, and foster sustainable solutions.

As an ongoing part of their work, DPNs reached out to educational organizations and community providers and joined with them on committees and projects. This outreach brought information about the many services and training opportunities for people with disabilities to community organizations that may have lacked a full understanding of available resources. In turn, DPNs brought information from housing, transportation, educational, employment support and other community organizations and groups back to the CareerCenter. A representative of a statewide organization for the Deaf said of the DPN effort: "The outreach to the Deaf community has/will mean a lot, and [the DPNs] have opened doors that will remain open after [their] work there has ended."

DPN efforts included:

- Community organization workshops for CareerCenter staff
- Training provided at an adult education center on the Maine CareerCenter online services
- Inclusion of high school students in Disability Mentoring Day and National Disability Employment Awareness Month activities
- DPN-led CareerCenter tours



In Conclusion

Along with some of the highlights described in this report, the DPNs worked in partnership with many groups to ensure that the right information was being shared. The result of these efforts generally improved communication among the many agencies providing employment services to those with disabilities. The cumulative effect of this work was an improved, less frustrating system for those seeking employment.

After funding for the DPN program ended nationally in June 2010, the Maine Department of Labor's Bureau of Employment Services received \$106,000 to continue the DPN Initiative in a more limited scope for the remainder of the Program Year 2010. In addition, \$50,000 was contributed by the CHOICES CEO project at the Muskie School of Public Service. These resources allowed the Initiative to continue with a full-time statewide DPN based in the Coastal Counties region through Goodwill Industries of Northern New England, and a half-time DPN based in the northern Tri-County region through the Eastern Maine Development Corporation.

With the limited funding, the Initiative continued to focus on the areas of technical assistance, staff development, assistive technology, the Ticket to Work program, and outreach and education.

Next Steps

In the fall of 2010, MDOL was awarded a \$1.5 million Disability Employment Initiative (DEI) grant to continue the work of the DPN Initiative in Maine's LWIB Regions 1 and 2 (Penobscot, Piscataquis, Hancock, Washington and Aroostook Counties) and to expand BES's Ticket to Work program statewide. The grant period is from October 2010 through September 30, 2013.

The purpose of the Disability Employment Initiative is to increase access and improve educational, training, and employment opportunities for adults with disabilities through Maine's workforce development system (Maine's CareerCenters). Program partners, including Maine's LWIB Regions 1 and 2, the Bureau of Employment Services's (BES) Network of CareerCenters and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), will work together to revise and/or establish new permanent statewide/regional systems and policies to better serve people with disabilities.

Appendix A: Key Partnerships

Partners involved with the DPN program:

Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

Staff members of the Bureau's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired are co-located within the CareerCenters. DPNs coordinated joint staff training, resource sharing, and worked on IRTs together.

The CHOICES CEO project (Maine's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant)

The project has included the DPN initiative in its work plan and has given funds to support it during the last two years. They have been a partner with employer outreach for Disability Mentoring Day.

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

Maine's DHHS agency houses the Office of Adult Mental Health Services, Office of Cognitive and Physical Disabilities, TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) and many other programs. DPNs and DHHS staff shared information at professional conferences and within the CareerCenters. The Bureau of Employment Services held regular meetings to find ways to work together to serve TANF and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) recipients.

Work Incentive Planning and Assistance (WIPA)

Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWICs), who represent the WIPA program, use the CareerCenters to meet with clients who receive Social Security. CWICs regularly refer clients to CareerCenter programs. CWICs have held training for beneficiaries at the Centers; these were often coordinated with the DPN to occur in conjunction with job fairs. CWIC's are part of the Integrated Resource Teams. They participate in Disability Mentoring Day and other outreach activities. Fact sheets have been developed by WIPA for use by the DPNs; these fact sheets allow DPNs to provide information to CareerCenter customers before they are able to meet with a CWIC.

Protection and Advocacy for Beneficiaries of Social Security (PABSS)

The PABSS program helps remove barriers to employment for beneficiaries of Social Security (SSI/DI). The PABSS representative in Maine was in regular communication with the DPN team and joined the DPNs on a quarterly basis to share news and updates from Social Security and to address challenges facing DPNs and CareerCenter customers. In addition, PABSS staff attended Integrated Resource Team meetings when appropriate.

Commission on Disability and Employment (CDE)

The CDE is a sub-committee of the Maine Jobs Council (State Workforce Board) and operates in Maine as the Governor's Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities. The CDE served as the DPN initiative's advisory group. The lead DPN attended monthly meetings, provided a written summary of grant activities, responded to questions, and received guidance on grant activities. The CDE's diverse membership — including people with disabilities — offered new perspectives on issues facing job seekers with disabilities.

Appendix B: Background to the DPN Grant

The Maine Department of Labor received Round III grant funding for the Disability Program Navigator Initiative in September of 2007.

Through the DPN grant initiative, the Department of Labor was able to hire:

- One Disability Program Lead Navigator employed at Maine Department of Labor's Bureau of Employment Services
- Four Disability Program Navigators employed by service providers contracted through Maine's Local Workforce Investment Board regions

There are several entities in Maine — including the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), Bureau of Employment Services' CareerCenters, and the CHOICES CEO project (Maine's Medicaid Infrastructure Grant) — that share a common goal of supporting people with disabilities who work or who would like to work. Support and direction from the Maine Department of Labor, Bureau of Employment Services, and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services were provided.

The Disability Program Navigator Initiative built on the work of the AbleME grant. In 2003, the Maine Ability Partnership (MAP) was established through a planning grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor, and focused on an assessment of Maine CareerCenters.

The MAP assessment found that the CareerCenter system could not meet the demand for vocational services among Maine residents with disabilities, citing the 1,400 individuals on the VR wait list at the time of the assessment. It also identified several specific areas of concern regarding awareness and knowledge of disability issues among CareerCenter staff; a need for training and professional development to address misinformation and stereotyping; and obsolete and inaccessible technology at many of the CareerCenters.

Further, despite stated goals of universal access, there was a general perception among both CareerCenter staff and individuals with disabilities themselves that CareerCenters could not (or should not) serve all people with disabilities. The Maine Department of Labor received a follow-up grant (AbleME) to implement a variety of activities designed to address the findings of the MAP.

The statewide AbleME initiative included the Maine Jobs Council, all CareerCenters, and the state's four local Workforce Investment Boards. The goals of AbleME were to improve the CareerCenter system for job seekers with disabilities, improve access to CareerCenter services, facilitate coordination and collaboration of the various providers, and improve employment outcomes for those with disabilities.



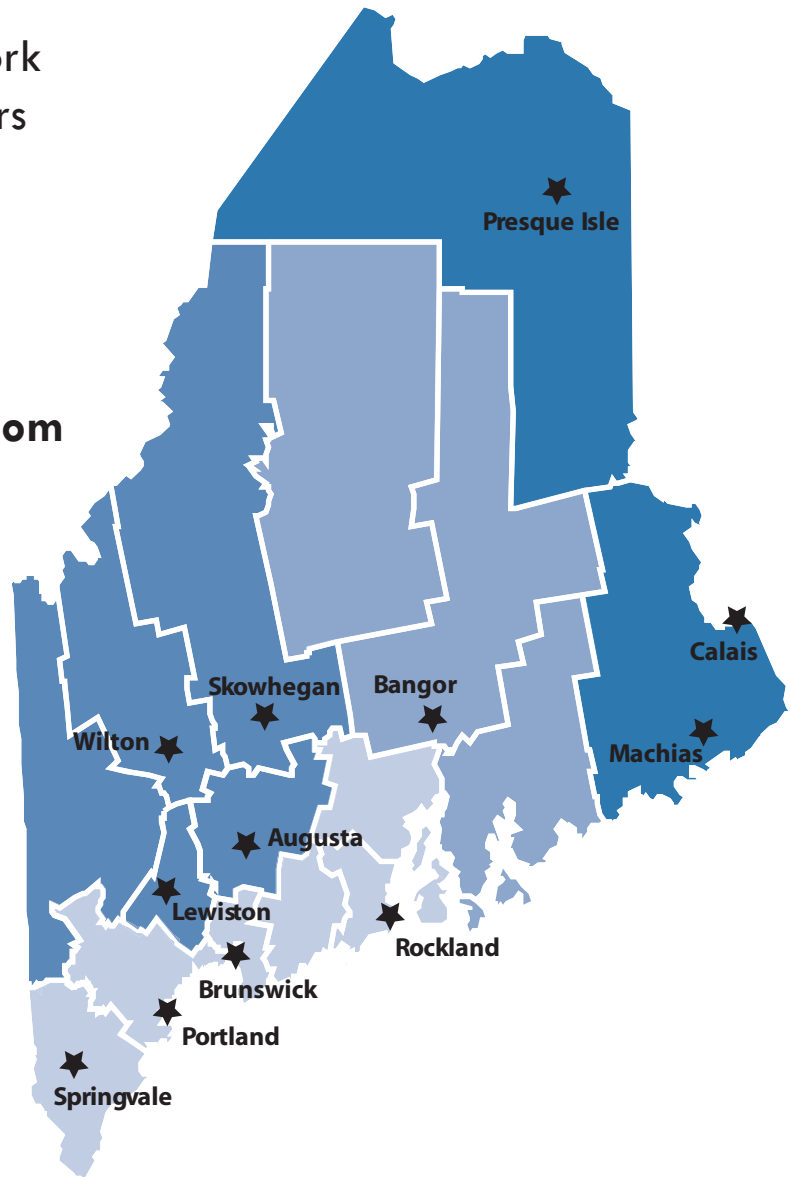


The Maine CareerCenter network consists of 12 full-service centers and additional service points and partner providers located throughout the state.

For a complete list of locations, visit: **www.mainecareercenter.com**

Or call 1-888-457-8883

TTY users call Maine Relay 711



www.mainecareercenter.com

The Maine Department of Labor provides equal opportunity in employment and programs.
Auxiliary aids and services are available to individuals with disabilities upon request.